

TITLE: Using Personal Stories to Enhance the Team Member Experience

ABSTRACT:

As faculty, we have become acutely aware of the challenges of students' experiences working in teams. They likely have had bad team experiences, however, employers continue to identify working effectively in diverse teams as an important competency for our students. The objective of this session is to provide an opportunity for faculty to experience first-hand a practice that allows students to more positively approach teamwork by developing a relationship with team members through personal stories and learning to value differences in team members in the initial forming stage of their teams. Following the activity, participants will share their experience and hear some of the comments and outcomes of students who participated in the activity.

KEYWORDS: Team experience, Collaboration, Psychological Safety

Introduction

This activity is intended to provide an opportunity for faculty to experience first-hand a practice that allows students to more positively approach teamwork by developing a relationship with team members through personal stories and learning to value differences in team members in the initial forming stage of their teams. As faculty, we have become acutely aware of the challenges of students' experiences working in teams. In our individualistic culture, students strive and focus on getting a good grade individually and many do not welcome working in teams. They likely have had bad team experiences, however, employers continue to identify working effectively in diverse teams as an important competency for our students. As instructors we are challenged by witnessing dysfunctional teams in our courses as we try to instill team skills in students before they graduate and enter the workforce. Through an introductory assignment, students model bringing your whole self to work. They begin with a written assignment and then verbally share *their personal stories* with their team members. This is followed by written reactions to each team member's personal story. It has been our experience over several years of refining this assignment, that our students have demonstrated a markedly improved team experience. In the session, we will also share experiences and feedback from our students as well as our experiences as instructors.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications.

Despite the emergence of team skills as critical competencies in the workplace and the dramatic increase in the use of student teams throughout the business curriculum (Hanson, 2006; Hillier & Dunn-Jensen, 2012), our understanding of student teams is still somewhat limited.

Researchers, as well as business professors, continue to highlight the challenges of students

working in teams (Halfhill & Nielsen, 2007; Hillier & Dunn-Jensen, 2012). Evidence from the literature suggests that team psychological safety, defined as the “shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking” (Edmonson, 1999, p354), enhances students team experience and improves team performance. Psychologically safe team environments, foster authenticity and openness among team members by encouraging team members to contribute their ideas freely. They are therefore confident that there is no reprisal for voicing their opinions, or ridicule from others for making mistakes or needing help (Edmondson, 1999). As a result, the full range of team members’ ideas, opinions, and perspectives emerges, leading to positive team outcomes (Bradley, Klotz, Postlethwaite, Hamdani, & Brown, 2011). Indeed, psychologically safe team climates have been positively associated with team learning and team performance (Edmonson, 1999); greater collaboration and performance (Caruso & Wooley, 2008); and constructive voice behavior (Walumbwa & Schaubroek, 2009). Further evidence from Project Aristotle, a two-year study conducted by Google based on 180 teams, found that psychological safety was a key element of the highest-performing teams (Delizonna, 2017). A review of the literature suggests that the quality of interpersonal relationships is a key precursor of psychologically safe environments (e.g., Zhang, Fang, Wei, & Chen, 2010). In line with this stream of research, we argue that encouraging students to build high quality relationships with their team members from the onset, will help foster a psychologically safe environment, which should improve their team experience. Often, students come in with preconceived notions of both working in teams and perhaps the people they will be working with in their teams. This affects their openness and ability to work with each other. Requiring students to participate in this personal story/reaction activity at the beginning of the semester, strongly influences them to be more open about

themselves and receptive to each other's differences, thereby stimulating the formation of high-quality relationships with their team members.

Learning Objectives

The objective of this session is to provide participants with an effective experiential exercise to use in the classroom, both face-to-face and online, for developing undergraduate and graduate students' team skills. Specifically, our session is intended to provide attendees with an approach we have developed for enhancing the team experience of students in the classroom as well as the quality of interactions, ability to work with diverse team members and ultimately quality of work submitted. At the end of the session, participants will have:

- Written and shared their personal journey and background with their team members.
- Written and shared their reactions to their team members' personal stories.
- Linked their experience to the challenges of working in teams and benefits of building community.

Exercise Overview

We will start our session by discussing some of the challenges the participants have encountered with students working in teams. We will follow this with a brief overview of the activity, and how it can begin to address some of the issues we identified with student teams. The activity is divided into two parts. The first part will require participants to write their personal story, which involves answering a few questions – see Appendix for the list of questions. Next, we will break attendees into groups of three or four, where they will have the opportunity to share their personal story with their team members. They will then complete the second part of the activity,

which is reacting to each team member's personal story and sharing their reactions. Attendees will then be asked to rejoin the class for a debrief. Participants' will report their experiences in their teams, and we will share feedback as well as our experiences with students in our courses.

Session Description

Our 90- minute presentation is intended to provide attendees with an approach we have developed for enhancing the team experience in the classroom as well as the quality of interactions, ability to work with diverse team members and quality of work submitted. Our session will be a combination of power point presentations, handouts (See Appendix), breakout team session, and facilitated discussions. Attendees will be asked to engage and actually participate in the activity in the main session as well as in groups. Below is a summary of participant involvement and the proposed timeline

Attendees Involvement:

1. Discussion of experiences: Discussing their insights on student perspectives, as well as from the instructors' perspective.
2. Participation in Assignment Part 1: Writing and sharing personal stories in their groups.
3. Participation in Assignment Part 2: Reacting to each other's personal stories and sharing reactions in their groups.
4. Debriefing: Sharing experience in groups with the rest of the attendees. Summarizing our experiences in the classroom.

Time Management:

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|---------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 10 min | Introduction and Agenda | Presenter 1 and Presenter 2 |
| 15 min. | Experience Working with Student Teams | Presenter 1 |

Experience Working with Student Teams Presenter 2

Solicit audience input on their experience and challenges

25 min Attendees participate in exercise on personal stories: provide questions and instructions for what do to when telling and when listening

20 min Attendees share reaction to personal stories: provide questions and instructions for what to write in the reaction to the personal story

20 min Debrief and Wrap up. Includes:-

Data to support the effectiveness of our assignment

Presenter 1 – testimonials (feedback from students)

Presenter 2 – testimonials (feedback from students)

Total Minutes Requested: 90 minutes.

References:

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Appendix (will be adapted for use with participants in the workshop)

Personal Story Assignment: Part 1:

You are required to write a one to two-page double spaced account of your personal story – see prompts below. Be prepared to share your story with your team members in class. The following questions should be addressed in both your written assignment as well as when sharing with your group.

1. What is your story? Which identity groups do you identify with the most?
2. What is your heritage? What do you know about your family's backgrounds/stories (that you are willing to share)?
3. What are some important events in your life?
4. How did you get to where you are today? What/Who influenced you the most?
5. Why is education important to you? Why are you pursuing an undergraduate degree?
6. Did you have mentors and/or role models throughout your journey? Who were they? How did they affect/influence you?
7. What is your chosen field? What do you plan to do after graduation? Where do you see yourself 5 years from now?

Personal Story Assignment Part II: Reaction(s) to Personal Stories:

You will be expected to submit a written reaction as a discussion post for your team to each of your group members' personal stories. You should write the post as if you are speaking directly to the team member and not about the team member. Your reaction write-up should include the following:

Personal Story of: _____

1. What did you learn about this group member?
2. What are some similarities/differences between your experience and his/hers?
3. What impressed and or surprised you the most?
4. What would you like to know more about?